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Mobster Takes 5th on JFK Slaying

By Ron Sarro
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One of three gangland figures allegedly hired by the CIA to eliminate Fidel Castro in the early 1960s today refused to cooperate with the House Assassination Committee in its investigation of the murder of former President John F. Kennedy.

Despite a warning he might be cited for contempt of Congress, Miami gangland figure Santo Trafficante Jr. refused to answer 13 questions about the Castro plot, his connections with the CIA and prior knowledge of Kennedy's assassination.

IN ANOTHER development, the attorney for James Earl Ray disclosed that the convicted killer of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. will be questioned under oath next week in his Tennessee jail cell by assassination committee staff.

The scene at today's hearing was reminiscent of the old Kefauver Rackets Committee hearings. Trafficante, a balding, elderly man in a gray suit, quietly recited his rights under the 1st, 4th, 5th and 14th Amendments as questions were posed by Committee Chief Counsel Richard Sprague.

Next to Trafficante sat his Florida lawyer, Henry Gonzalez, in a three-piece black pinstriped suit.

TRAFFICANTE is the only surviving member of the CIA "hit squad" allegedly hired to kill Castro in 1960. Sam Giancana of Chicago was shot to death June 19, 1975, and John Rosselli's body was found floating in an oil drum in Biscayne Bay later that summer.

Sprague asked Trafficante whether he had ever worked under contract with the CIA and whether he knew Rosselli, a longtime associate. The witness refused to answer.

Trafficante was also asked whether he had prior knowledge of the assassination of Kennedy in Dallas Nov. 22, 1963, or had ever "advised" other people about the killing.

Sprague also asked whether Trafficante knew Jack Ruby, murderer of Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, and whether Ruby had ever visited Trafficante while the witness was in prison in Cuba, once the base of his gambling empire. Again the witness wouldn't answer.

Trafficante also would not say whether he had ever met with the CIA to discuss the assassination of Castro or other world leaders or whether he had immunity in connection with such plans.

Nor would he say whether he knew Robert Maheu, the former official in the Howard Hughes business empire who reportedly put the CIA in touch with Giancana.

WHEN IT became evident that Trafficante was going to continue to plead potential self-incrimination, Assassination Committee Chairman Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, recessed the meeting for nearly 10 minutes while the panel held an informal meeting in a room just off the hearing chamber.

See PROBE, A-6

After the meeting Stokes told Trafficante the committee felt his "claim of privilege was inappropriate" and that it may recommend that he be cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to answer questions even when directed to do so. Trafficante remains under subpoena and could be recalled.

Later Stokes said it "was unfortunate" that the committee was unable to get answers to some important questions. But he emphasized that the mobster's appearance was only one facet of the Kennedy investigation.

Stokes acknowledged, however, "We had some idea he probably would assert his constitutional privilege."

Asked if Trafficante might justifiably fear for his life since the other two Mafia figures involved in the Castro plot have been murdered, Stokes said he had "no knowledge of that type of activity . . . I don't know how to answer your question."

MEANWHILE in Nashville, Ray's attorney, Jack Kershaw, said he would give a preliminary deposition to the assassination committee's

deputy counsel at Brushy Mountain State Prison in Petros, Tenn., where he is serving a 99-year sentence for the 1968 slaying of the civil rights leader.

Ray pleaded guilty, but now contends he did not shoot King.